



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 45 (April 2009)

### *What Does Scripture Say About Women Teachers?*

#### 1 Timothy 2:11–15

**A** DDRESSING THE QUESTION RAISED BY THIS month's "tough text" gives me a little insight into how a bomb squad technician must feel: "One wrong move and this thing will blow up in my face." To set the stage, therefore, I want to say right up front that the ministry of women is of incalculable value. To be honest, in fact, words truly fail to adequately express such worth.

*First*, and foremost, a woman is to be a "help-meet" to her husband (Gen. 2:18, 20), that is, "a fitting help," one who is tailor-made by God to meet every need of her husband and support and aid him in ministry. *Second*, a woman is to be a homemaker (1 Tim. 5:14; Titus 2:5), one who makes a warm nest for her family. *Third*, she is to teach her children and younger women how to serve the Lord (Titus 2:3–5). How can you put a price on all that? Such a woman's value is, indeed, "far above rubies" (Prov. 31:10; cf. 11–31). If I may interject, I have personally had the joy of being married to such a woman for 35 years, as of this very month.

That is the role of women as set forth in the Word of God. Sadly, however, such incalculable worth is not good enough for modern thinking. Feminism has infiltrated the church, creating what can safely be dubbed "Christian Feminism," the attitude that women can do whatever they choose, they can "have it all," and other such humanistic nonsense.

Nowhere is this more evident, in fact, than in the area of preaching, teaching, and leading in the church. While we briefly mentioned this in a previous TOTT (#21, April 2007, "What About the Deacon and Deaconess?"), there is today a need for further clarity. Never in Church History

do we find as many women adopting these roles than today, in spite of the fact of how unmistakably clear it is in Scripture that they should not. This has arisen, of course, from the *Egalitarian View* that permeates our society, and which has infiltrated our churches, schools, and seminaries. This view, held not only by liberals but by several noted evangelicals,<sup>1</sup> maintains that men and women are equal in essence and function and no role distinctions can be made between them.

Adherents to this view often see Paul as either contradicting himself or at least being confused when he wrote to Timothy: **Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.** Some hold that his attitudes were molded more from rabbinical teachers of his day than from Divine inspiration (a blatantly blasphemous idea to start with). Their "proof text" is Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus," which they say teaches that because we are all one in Christ, therefore most, if not all, order and authority structure in the church should be eliminated. Just reading the verse and its context, however, demonstrates that they have absolutely nothing to do with roles, rather *spiritual* position, possessions, and privileges.

Others try a more scholarly approach by saying that the word **authority** actually means "domination," which means that Paul was simply telling the women not to domineer, or run over the men in the church, not that they could not lead them at all. On this point, one modern commentator graphically demonstrates the modern trend of re-

interpreting this passage:

As is true in all of his letters, Paul is addressing specific people and specific situations. Rarely do we have access to the actual problems. But is it not safe to assume that some of these newly liberated women in Christ had become overly aggressive in the meetings of the congregation? . . . What the interpreter must decide, then, is the scope of application. Were these only local situations that needed the drastic remedy that Paul prescribed, or was Paul setting forth a universal rule to be applied in all churches, in all places? I prefer the former . . . Paul is clearly referring to his personal practice. It seems to me that this practice is to be limited rather than universal in the church.<sup>2</sup>

While our desire is always to speak the truth in love, such comments are truly appalling. The statement, “Rarely do we have access to the actual problems,” is a subtle attack on biblical sufficiency, obviously implying that “since we don’t have all the facts, we can’t say for sure.” Further, the words “it seems to me” are irrelevant. What matters is what the text says. Was Paul simply giving his opinion and dealing only with a local abuse? Such ideas are preposterous, as his going back to the Old Testament precedent in verses 13–14 proves beyond doubt. In fact, Paul goes back to this precedent in the other major texts that deal with this issue (1 Cor. 11:7–9; 14:34). In all these Paul points out the authority structure that God created in the beginning.

We say again, like most of today’s trends, *such reinterpretation is a wholly modern invention*. In contrast to the above, note another commentator’s exposition, this one by the incomparable John Gill, who ministered in London 100 years before Spurgeon and who Spurgeon quoted often. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:5 (and also citing 14:34–35), he wrote: “Not that a woman was allowed to pray publicly in the congregation, and much less to preach or explain the word, for these things were not permitted them.” On our text, Gill further comments:

They may teach in private, in their own houses and families; they are to be teachers of good things, Titus. 2:3. . . . but then women are not to teach in the church. . . . one part of rule is to feed the church with knowledge and understanding; and for a woman to take upon her to do this, is to usurp an authority over the man: this therefore she ought not to do.<sup>3</sup>

Gill is not an isolated example. Unlike our day, when words can mean whatever each individual chooses them to mean, most expositors and theologians of yesterday knew Scripture and were not swayed by modern thought. We could cite one quotation after another. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:33–39, as well as our text, B. B. Warfield, wrote: “It would be impossible for the apostle to speak more directly or more emphatically than he has done here. He requires women to be silent at the church-meetings. . . .

Neither the teaching nor the ruling function is permitted to woman.”<sup>4</sup> Calvin adds that Paul “forbids them to speak in public, either for the purpose of teaching or of prophesying.”<sup>5</sup> And the examples go on. If I may be so bold, is it that we are more *enlightened* today, or are we just *defiant*?

So, does **authority** actually mean “to domineer” as insisted today? Not precisely. While the Greek *authentēō* (English, “authority,” etc.), which appears only here in the New Testament, includes the idea of domination, its primary meaning is more basic. As one Greek scholar states, “The kindred noun *authentēs*, ‘one who does a thing with his own hand,’ [appears in Classical Greek] in Herodotus, Euripides, and Thucydides.”<sup>6</sup> All this is derived from *autos* (“himself”) and *entea* (“arms or armor”), indicating “a self-appointed killer with one’s own hand, one acting by his own authority or power.”<sup>7</sup> Further, Paul goes on to narrow the idea by saying a woman is not to **teach**, that is, not in the public assembly. The point could not be clearer.

The words **silence** and **silent** are also reinterpreted nowadays. The Greek in both instances (*hēsuchia*) unmistakably means “silence,” but some argue that it can mean “a meek and quiet spirit,” therefore, permitting women to preach or teach as long as they do it with the proper attitude. Not only is this reading something into the word that isn’t there, but if there were any doubt to the meaning, the word **subjection** would erase it. The Greek *hupotagē* literally means “to line up under” showing subordination and submission. As if that’s not enough, God prefixes **subjection** with the words **with all**, emphasizing the *complete* subjection called for. In the context of all public meetings, women are to be silent and content in the role of the learner. If I may lovingly say, today’s playing of word games and careless exegesis simply ignore the plain truth of Scripture.

Are we saying women are inferior? *Absolutely not!* That is precisely why Paul said, **Let the woman learn**. While it’s obvious to us that women should be taught God’s Word—they are spiritually equal in Christ and the commands of the New Testament are to all (1 Peter 2:1–2)—it was not at all obvious to those who came from a Jewish background. First-century Judaism did not hold women in high esteem. While not barred from attending synagogue, neither were they encouraged to learn. In fact, most rabbis refused to teach women, and some likened it to throwing pearls to pigs. Nor was the status of women in both Greek and Roman society any better. They could not hold public office or even go into any public assembly.

What we see here, then, is the exact opposite of what Paul is accused of by our modern “liberated society.” Far from being a “male chauvinist,” what he said to Timothy, and by extension the Ephesian believers, was shockingly revolutionary. He didn’t *suggest* that women be taught, rather *commanded* them to be taught. With that one statement, Paul did more for women than anyone else in his day or ours.

But, while this was new to contemporary Jewish tradition, it wasn't new to men of God at all. The Old Testament clearly declared the spiritual equality of women to men. The Mosaic Law was given to all Israel, both men and women (Deut. 1:1). Both were to teach it to their children (Deut. 6:4–7; Prov. 6:20). Both were equally protected by the Law (Ex. 21:28–32). Both had inheritance rights (Num. 36:1–12). Both participated in the Jewish religious feasts (Ex. 12:3; Deut. 16:9–15). Both could take the Nazarite vow (Num. 6:2). And both were involved in spiritual service (Ex. 38:8; Neh. 7:67). We also see that God at times dealt directly with women (Gen. 3:13; 16:7–13; Judg. 13:3).

The same is true in the New Testament. Jesus revealed His messiahship first to a woman (Jn. 4:25–26). He also not only healed women (Mk. 5:25–34; Lk. 13:11–13) but crossed the tradition of the rabbis by teaching women (Lk. 10:38–42). Women reciprocated this attitude by ministering to Jesus and His disciples (Lk. 8:2–3). The first person Jesus appeared to after His resurrection was a woman (Mk. 16:9; Jn. 20:11–18). Both women and men were involved in the prayer services of the early church (Acts 1:13–14). Peter reminds men that women are to be “[given] honor . . . as the weaker vessel and as being heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7). The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:21–22) is for both men and women. In short, all the promises, commands, and blessings of the New Testament apply equally to women and men.

The other side of this issue, however, is that *spiritual equality* does not cancel out *differing roles*. In the Old Testament, there were no “queens” in either Israel or Judah (Athaliah was a usurper; 2 Kings 11:1–16; 2 Chr. 22:10–23:15). Many people react to this by saying, “Oh, but Deborah served as a judge (Judg. 4:1–5:31) and proves that women can lead.” Her case, however, was unique. Dr. Robert L. Saucy comments,

There may be instances when the regular pattern of God's order may have to be set aside due to unusual circumstances. When, for example, the husband and father is absent, the woman of the house assumes the headship of the family. So it would appear, there may be unusual circumstances when male leadership is unavailable for one reason or another. At such times God may use women to accomplish his purposes even as he used Deborah.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, all the men in Israel were paralyzed with fear at Jabin, the king of Canaan (4:2–3), so there was no one who would stand except one woman. She then encouraged Barak to pursue God's plan. It's significant, however, and often ignored, that Deborah declined to lead the military campaign against the Canaanites, deferring instead to a man, Barak.

Additionally, not a single woman ever served as a priest, was an Old Testament author, or had an ongoing

proclamation or teaching ministry like that of Elijah, Elisha, or the other prophets. While it is true that Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3) are called “prophetesses,” not one of them had a permanent calling to that office. *Even more significant, in not a single one of those instances is there even the slightest indication of this being done in a public setting.* Additionally, in fact, Isaiah's wife did not prophesy at all—she was called a prophetess only because she gave birth to a child whose name had prophetic meaning—and the other three prophesied only once each.

So while many today are desperate for any biblical justification they can conjure up to support women teachers, it is a futile exercise. One writer puts it well in his comment about Huldah:

Though Huldah was a prophetess, the solitary record of her prophesying involved some men going to her where they communed privately. . . . It is impossible to find public preaching here.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Noadiah is the only other “prophetess” named, but she was a false prophetess (Neh. 6:14). So while there were instances when God spoke through women, it was rare and extremely limited. Not one had a permanent role of preaching or teaching and not one did it in public. Each served, as the Latin says, *exceptio probat regulum* (the exception establishes the rule<sup>10</sup>).

Undeterred, modern reinterpreters zealously turn to the New Testament to try to prop up their sagging argument, but we find the same pattern there as we do in the Old. Totally ignored is the plain and simple fact that we find not a single woman pastor-teacher, evangelist, bishop, or elder.<sup>11</sup> Also like the Old Testament, no New Testament author was a woman, nor do we find a record of even one sermon or teaching by a woman.

Luke 2:36–38 is cited as evidence of women teachers because Anna was a prophetess who served in the Temple. But if one just reads the passage, he immediately sees that it clarifies that she “served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” There is not the slightest intimation that she was involved in public teaching. In fact, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish historian Josephus makes clear, on one side of Herod's Temple “there was a partition built for the women . . . as the proper place wherein they were to worship” and “when they went through their own gate could they go beyond their own wall.”<sup>12</sup> Because of such separation from the men, public instruction was impossible.

Priscilla is also repeatedly appealed to as “proof” of women teachers because of her aid in the instruction of Apollos (Acts 18:26). But it should also be noted that Aquilla is mentioned first and was undoubtedly in charge, and the instruction was in private.

Appeal is also made to Acts 2:17–18 and 21:9, both of which say there were prophetess in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church. But again, in neither case is either the occasion or the mes-

sage included, so there is no justification in *assuming* that they taught during the public worship, much less that they had an ongoing preaching ministry. The book of Acts, in fact, nowhere records a woman teaching men in public. The same is true of Euodias and Syntyche. While they “laboured with [Paul] in the gospel” (Phil. 4:2–3), there is no indication that their aid was public preaching or teaching.

In addition to all that irrefutable evidence, *presbuteros* (“elder”) is masculine. If women could be elders, the Bible would somewhere say so by using the Greek word *presbutera*, but we never find that term in the Bible as speaking of a female elder. While *presbuteras* does appear in 1 Timothy 5:2, it is used only to refer to older women not women elders.

Likewise, the requirements for leadership in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 speak specifically of “a man” desiring the office (v. 1) and the necessity of him being “the husband of one wife” (v. 2). With no sarcasm intended, I know of no way that a woman can be the husband of one wife.

To repeat a comment from the aforementioned TOTT #21, in the meeting and ministry of the Church, a woman is neither to teach nor have a position of leadership. Men are to lead, and women are to follow. In short, women are to be *learners*, not *leaders*. Even Acts 6 clearly indicates that only men filled the office of deacon. (As demonstrated in TOTT #21, “deaconess” is not a New Testament office.)

Does all this mean that women are inferior to men? As mentioned earlier, NO, NO, a thousand times NO. God simply commands differing roles as being in line with His design for the weaker vessel. The issue is not *superiority*, rather *authority*, which in turn results in *responsibility* and *accountability*. That is why God said through James, “Be not many [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (Jas. 3:1). Countless Christians today, both men and women, have no idea how foolish they are being to take on the responsibility of teaching, which they are not *called to*, *qualified for*, or *trained in*.

Alas, in spite of all the clear, indisputable evidence, the practice of women preaching, teaching, and leading has never been so rampant. From church worship, to “revivals,” to seminars, to Bible colleges, and every other venue, this trend permeates today’s church. With extremely rare exceptions, this practice has been virtually nonexistent in the Church until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and according to the clear teaching of the Word of God, it is wrong, regardless

of the famous women who practice it and the popular teachers (both women and men) who defend it.

For the sake of unity, we will not list the many who are practicing this today, but sadly the list is a long one. If I may say from my burdened heart, it is a sad commentary on the Church today that a principle so crystal clear, an issue so beyond even the minutest dash of doubt, that it can still be readjusted, or even totally ignored, for the sole purpose of conforming to modern thought.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Examples: former professor at Moody Bible Institute, Stanley Gundry; Mennonite theologian Myron S. Augsburger; textual scholar F.F. Bruce; popular speaker and writer Tony Campolo; commentators Gordon Fee, Walter Liefeld, and Lloyd J. Ogilvie; and noted pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher's Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, 1982-1992), electronic edition. The similar reading of personal opinion into the text appears in the *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale).

<sup>3</sup> *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (electronic edition)

<sup>4</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Paul on Women Speaking in the Church* (<http://www.apuritansmind.com/Pastoral/WarfieldBBWomenSpeaking.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> *Commentaries* (1 Cor. 14:34).

<sup>6</sup> M. R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*, electronic edition.

<sup>7</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers, 1993), electronic edition, #831.

<sup>8</sup> “The Negative Case Against the Ordination of Women,” in Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 285.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Jackson, “Woman’s Role in the Church,” *Christian Courier*, March 16, 2000 (<http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/169-womans-role-in-the-church>)

<sup>10</sup> The often used expression “the exception proves the rule” is imprecise, “leading the unwary to think that any self-respecting rules must have an exception. What is meant is that the existence of an exception to a rule provides an opportunity to test the validity of a rule: Finding an exception to a rule enables us to define the rule more precisely, confirming its applicability to those items truly covered by the rule” (Eugene Ehrlich, *Amo, Amas, Amat and More* [Harper and Row, Hudson Group, 1985], p. 121).

<sup>11</sup> See TOTT # 19 & 20, (Feb./Mar., 2007), “Pastor, Bishop, and Elder,” for a study of these critical terms.

<sup>12</sup> *The Wars of the Jews*, Book 5, Chapter 5, Section 2.

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